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## UNDERSTANDING METAL DETECTING AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN FINLAND

Comprendiendo la detección de metales y la Arqueología en Finlandia

Suzie Thomas \*, Anna Wessman \*, Jenni Siltainsuu \*\* and Wesa Perttola \*

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**ABSTRACT** The use of the metal detector in archaeology, and the relationships between metal detecting enthusiasts and archaeologists, has been long discussed and analysed in different contexts. The tool itself is acknowledged to be a useful prospecting device for use in archaeological fieldwork, and yet it has often attracted controversy in academic and professional archaeological circles due to its popularity with artefact-hunting hobbyists. In this paper, we discuss the emerging trends of metal detector use in Finland. This includes what is known about the hobbyist metal detector enthusiasts and their motivations, the extent of collaboration (or clashes) with archaeologists, and the current and potential use of metal detectors within archaeological fieldwork.

**Keywords:** Finland, metal detecting, Archaeology, Collaboration, looting.

**SUMARIO** El uso de detectores de metales en arqueología, y la relación entre los aficionados a la detección de metales y los arqueólogos, ha sido ampliamente discutida y analizada en diferentes contextos. Se reconoce la utilidad de la propia herramienta como útil instrumento para la prospección en el trabajo de campo arqueológico, sin embargo, a menudo ha atraído controversia en círculos académicos y de arqueólogos profesionales debido a su popularidad con entusiastas de la búsqueda de objetos [arqueológicos]. En este artículo, tratamos las emergentes tendencias en el uso de aparatos detectores de metales en Finlandia. Esto incluye qué se conoce sobre los usuarios no profesionales de los aparatos detectores de metales y sus motivaciones, el grado de colaboración (o conflictos) con los arqueólogos, y el actual y potencial uso de los detectores de metales dentro del trabajo de campo arqueológico. Palabras clave: Finlandia, Detección de metales, Arqueología, Colaboración, Expolio.

## INTRODUCTION

The metal detecting hobby is common in many countries, and the relationship of the hobby with archaeologists has been discussed in a number of settings, particularly within Europe. For example, the literature has discussed hobbyist metal detecting in countries such as the UK (Thomas, 2012), the Netherlands (van der Schriek and van der Schriek, 2014), Norway (Rasmussen, 2014), and Denmark (Dobat, 2013). The merits of metal detection as a successful prospection method for archaeology itself has been discussed for countries even where the hobbyist, non-professional activity of metal detecting is prohibited, such as in Sweden (Viberg et al. 2011). Similarly, the impact of illegal metal detecting in the form of looting is addressed in many national settings, such as in Estonia (Ulst, 2010) and Spain (Rodríguez-Temiño, 2012).

In the jurisdictions where metal detecting is permitted, for example alongside a license, permit, or on land that is not scheduled or otherwise protected, the hobby appears to have grown in recent years. This is certainly the case in Finland where reports suggest, anecdotally at least, that the number of metal detecting enthusiasts has increased significantly over the past few years. Some commentators have previously speculated about the different reasons for this growth in the hobby, such as the increase in

availability of cheaper metal detectors in recent years (lehtimäki, 2011:13). Yet there is little literature at present concerning the nature or the size of the metal detecting hobby in Finland, and its relationship to archaeological activity and research. In this paper, we aim to present key findings from recent qualitative and quantitative research by two of the authors (Wessman and Siltainsuu), and discuss both our experiences and those of other archaeologists working in Finland. We acknowledge, by bringing this information together in one paper, the need for further research in Finland.

We present first a brief overview of the legislative backdrop in Finland, and summarize recent questionnaire survey research concerning what is known about the current scale and nature of the hobby in Finland. We then discuss some recent examples of collaboration, but also of controversies that have emerged in the past few years. Finally, we discuss briefly some examples of use of the metal detector itself as a survey tool within Finnish archaeology, with or without hobbyist metal detectorists themselves.

## **LEGISLATION AFFECTING METAL DETECTING IN FINLAND**

There are relatively few legal restrictions on hobbyist metal detecting in Finland compared to many countries (such as France, where 'leisure metal detecting' is virtually impossible within current legislation – see Gransard-Desmond, 2013). The National Board of Antiquities (NBA), which in Finland is the authority with responsibility for cultural heritage, advises that:

In Finland, the use of a metal detector is usually allowed without a separate permit. However, metal detecting is regulated by various laws and acts. Laws that need to be especially observed when using a metal detector include the Antiquities Act (195/1963), the Lost Articles Act (778/1988), the Criminal Code (1889/39), the Nature Conservation Act (20/1996) and public right of access.

Additionally:

Under the Antiquities Act, it is prohibited to dig, cover, alter, damage, remove, or in any way disturb an ancient monument without a permission granted in accordance with the Act. According to the Act, an ancient monument also includes the area that is essential for the preservation of the monument. This area around the ancient monument is called the protected area. The law also applies to the protected area. If metal detecting reveals a previously unknown ancient monument or antiquity, or something assumed to be one, the Antiquities Act states that all digging and other activities must be stopped. The National Board of Antiquities must also be immediately notified of the find. (NBA 2014)

Under these current circumstances, metal detecting enthusiasts have access to metal detect in almost all areas, with permission from the landowner, unless they disturb a protected site under the Antiquities Act or contravene other regulations, for example in relation to disturbance of protected fauna. Furthermore, the principle of 'Everyman's right', which impacts an individual's right to roam, including camping and collection of natural products such as berries and mushrooms (Ministry of the Environment, 1999), has an impact on metal detecting activities. While the guidelines for the implementation of Everyman's right do not currently mention metal detecting explicitly, a number of Finnish metal-detector users interviewed in 2013 by one of the authors (Thomas) referred directly to it as a positive factor allowing their access to large areas of land in pursuit of their hobby. Metal detecting enthusiasts are expected to report any discoveries which may indicate an archaeological site to the NBA (there is even a specific email address for them to use), and may in many cases receive a 'finder's fee' for the artefacts that they report, if the NBA decides to

acquire the artefact. As we discuss later in this paper, the issue of the amount paid in a finder's fee can cause controversy at times. In other countries such as England and Wales, rewards are paid to finders of archaeological objects, with the amount to be paid affected by 'evidence of wrongdoing' (which would reduce the reward amount to be paid), as well as by market value informed by a panel of specialists (Bland, 2013). However, interviews by Thomas with senior staff at the NBA suggested that unlike some other countries, there is no market for archaeological material from Finland (or at least not an acknowledged one). This makes the use of a 'market value' effectively redundant, and instead the intrinsic value (for example the cost of the metal from which the object is made), plus an additional 25 per cent, is used in order to calculate the finder's fee.

Incidence of looting is relatively low in Finland compared to the many countries regarded as 'source nations'. These nations, for a variety of reasons including social deprivation, political upheaval, the prevalence of saleable archaeological material, and even complicity among the academic community, are regarded as particularly vulnerable to archaeological looting (Brodie, 2011; Kersel, 2008). Nonetheless, as discussed below, there have been a small number of cases of looting in recent times. Some Finnish metal detecting enthusiasts in interview with Thomas suggested that the comparatively low level of looting in Finland may be because the relatively low amount of financially valuable material that is found would not sustain an illicit trade in Finnish antiquities (thus making 'career looting' unviable). They also indicated that it was in the interests of Finnish detectorists to comply with the law, so as to avoid greater legal restrictions on their hobby in the future if key stakeholders, such as landowners, were to become displeased with their activities. While in countries such as Cyprus metal detecting tourists from such as the UK have been identified (Hardy, 2014:85), suggestions in interviews with Thomas, and also through the media (e.g. Yle, 2014) of the impact of detectorists from other countries coming to Finland, have yet to be researched fully. Certainly at least some detectorists from Finland have visited the UK to participate in metal detecting rallies, which in the UK are commonplace and often large scale events, attracting detectorists from many other countries (Bland, 2009:70).

## **METAL DETECTING IN FINLAND**

Interviews with four metal detectorists by Thomas in 2013 indicated that this admittedly small sample believed that the hobby had first appeared in Finland around 30 years ago. With regard to actual total numbers of individuals metal detecting, this is less easy to estimate. There are two online discussion forums for metal detecting which have a national reach. one is [www.aarremaanalla.com](http://www.aarremaanalla.com) (with 'aarremaanalla' translating to 'treasure underground', and the other is Suomen Metallinetsijät ry. ('Metal Detectorists of Finland'), which also acts as a national organization for metal detecting in Finland. In addition to this, there are three regional metal detecting clubs known to Finnish archaeological authorities:

- Kanta-Hämeen menneisyyden etsijät (roughly translated to 'Searchers of the Past of Kanta-Häme' - [www.khme.org](http://www.khme.org));
- Kymen rautakauden Etsijät (roughly translated to 'Searchers of the iron Age of Kymenlaakso' - [kymenrautakaudenetsijat.wordpress.com](http://kymenrautakaudenetsijat.wordpress.com)), and
- Rauman Seudun Metallinetsinseura ry. ('Metal detector society of Rauma region'), which was first formally registered in 1985 but had already formed before that time, for example having assisted archaeologist as early as 1983.

Rauman Seudun Metallinetsinseura appears to be the club that has run for the longest (in fact corresponding in date to the estimated emergence of the hobby as around 30 years ago by interviewees).

However, there may be more local metal detecting groups, as well as numbers of individuals involved in the hobby without joining an organization, and more research is needed to identify how many detectorists may exist in Finland.

In February 2014, Espoo City Museum carried out an internet-based survey for metal detecting enthusiasts (Siltainsuu and Wessman, 2014). The survey was made available for all the hobbyist in Finland via the online forums mentioned above, and formed part of the groundwork for the exhibition *Mysteries from the ground: Metal detecting as a hobby* (fig. 1). This temporary exhibition ran from late October 2014 to March 2015 at Glims Farmstead Museum, an open air museum in Espoo that is managed by Espoo City Museum. At the same time, the City Museum also interviewed seven metal detectorists from Espoo, which is part of the Greater Helsinki area in southern Finland. Data from the survey was analysed using qualitative methods. Sixty hobbyist in total answered the survey and most of them (65 per cent) were relatively new to the hobby. The usual age to start detecting appears to be from 20 to 40 years, and almost all of the Finnish detectorists are male. Drawing parallels with a similar survey in the UK, the gender bias towards male hobbyists is comparable, while active metal detecting enthusiasts in the UK would seem on average to be older than Finnish detectorists (cf. Thomas, 2012:51). As mentioned in the introduction, the growth of the number of hobbyists seems to have been significant in recent years. The most common reason to emerge for taking up the hobby was given as an interest in local history. One of the key motivators of the hobby was revealed to be the possibility of finding something that contributes new knowledge to research. As detectorists become more involved in their hobby, researching the background of the search sites takes a more important role. There are a small number of detectorists that search for material from specific historic eras, but for the most part the interest appears to be simply for finding something that they hope will contribute to research (Siltainsuu and Wessman, 2014).

*Fig. 1. —Section of the exhibition Mysteries from the ground: Metal detecting as a hobby, Glims Farmstead Museum Espoo (image by Anna Wessman / Espoo City Museum).*

## **COLLABORATION BETWEEN ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND METAL DETECTORISTS**

Espoo City Museum collaborated with metal detectorists for the first time in April 2014 at a field next to the Glims Farmstead Museum (fig. 2). The motivation behind the project was both scientific and pedagogical. A petting zoo was planned to be built upon the field but it had significance also due to its historical background. The Farmstead, although now a museum, has been used as an inn and hostelry from the 18-19th centuries, and the site was still a working farm at the beginning of the 20th century. Therefore, the museum staff suspected that historical items would be found on the field that could be connected to this phase of the site's history. A further motive was the plans for an exhibition about metal detecting in Espoo that was to be opened in October 2014 at the Glims Farmstead Museum, mentioned above. Espoo City Museum collaborated with archaeologists from the Department of Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies at the University of Helsinki as well, by involving archaeology students in practicing the use of a total station alongside the metal detector search. The project was a success, with 112 objects found during one day with in an area of approximately 4500 square meters. All objects were documented, including recent objects and 'rubbish', because the museum wanted to obtain detailed data about the scattered objects before they were analysed and dated more precisely. The project was a good learning experience for both the Museum employees and the participating metal detectorists, who reacted positively to the event. It proved, in our view, that keeping up the relationships with detectorists enhances the mutual trust, which in turn helps in planning further projects (see also Siltainsuu and Wessman, 2014).

*Fig. 2. —Metal detectorists and archaeology students from the University of Helsinki recording find spots at Glims Farmstead, April 2014 (Photo by: Suzie Thomas).*

Metal-detected discoveries have led to other innovative approaches to archaeological practice as well. In 2011 a metal detectorist discovered several late iron Age objects at Siikajoki in northern Ostrobothnia, which resulted in a trial excavation by the Department of Archaeology at the University of Oulu, and the discovery of a possible settlement site (Kuusela and Tolonen, 2011). In Illinsaari, also in northern Ostrobothnia, finds found by a metal detectorist triggered what became the first crowd-funded archaeological project in Finland (Koivisto, 2014). The research made by the archaeologists at the University of Oulu demonstrated the importance of conducting field work at sites that have been found by metal detectorists since otherwise the detected discoveries would be labelled as mere stray finds (Hakamäki et al., 2013).

In other regions too, good relationships exist between museum archaeologists and metal detecting enthusiasts. A small number of detectorists interviewed in the Pirkanmaa region in 2013 by Thomas reported that in the past few years they felt that they had a greatly improved relationship with the NBA, and also excellent relationships with local museum staff.

## **CONTROVERSIES CONCERNING METAL DETECTING IN FINLAND**

Despite some positive outcomes from collaboration and communication between metal detectorists and archaeologists in Finland, some incidents have also occurred that were less successful for a variety of reasons. In August 2013, a medieval gold ring was found by a metal detectorist in Espoo. The ring, which can be dated to the beginning of the 15th century, is of a unique type for Finland (fig. 3). Only a few rings of this type are known from northern Europe; one each from Sweden, Norway and Britain and three from Denmark (Espoo City Museum, 2014; Siltainsuu and Wessman, 2014). Following the reporting of the ring, it was analysed at the Espoo City Museum before it was displayed in the exhibition *A thousand stories about Espoo* at the Exhibition Centre WeeGee (Pietiläinen, 2014).

The media attention was immediately huge both in Finland and Sweden. However, most attention was given to the valuable material of which the ring was made, and to the method by which it was found. This also gave much attention to the metal detectorist as the finder. Espoo City Museum gave several interviews about the wider significance of the ring, from an archaeological perspective, but the content of the material that got printed was primarily concerned with the ring's uniqueness and its potential financial value (e.g. Lehtinen, 2013; Mokkila, 2013; Pietiläinen, 2013a-b; Rimaila, 2013a-b; Söderlund, 2013).

Hence the media attention surrounded a unique, gold ring with a potentially (certainly in the news reports) endless value. In January 2014 when the ring was claimed by the NBA, the detectorist who found the ring brought up the find once more in the media (Halonen, 2014; Nykänen, 2014; Ranta and Kuittinen, 2014). This time, much attention was given to the seemingly low finder's fee paid by the NBA and the debate in the social media very soon got confused with redemption versus reward (Aalto, 2014; Kuitunen, 2014, and in discussions on [aarremaanalla.com](http://aarremaanalla.com)). This debate, which is possible to follow online, can be divided into three different opinions. The first opinion type consists of archaeologists and people working with cultural heritage issues, the second belongs to the metal detecting community, and the third opinion belongs to the broader public, who have little or no knowledge of Finland's Antiquities Act. Perhaps surprisingly, many of the metal detectorists that expressed their opinion on the [aarremaanalla.com](http://aarremaanalla.com) discussion forum seemed to feel that the finder was wrong to take the fee paid to him into the public domain, while the wider public commenting on news articles online more frequently defended the finder. The debate that ensued was harmful in many ways. Some metal detecting enthusiasts have reported that it has become more difficult to get permissions from the landowners to detect after the public debate. Meanwhile, some archaeologists have started to distrust the detectorists as people who only seek economic gain, and not as people motivated by an enthusiasm to explore the past. The comments from the wider public also suggested that

the Antiquities Act is not understood or even accepted by the public. This means that a lot of education is still needed in order for the public to understand issues such as why ancient finds should belong to museums, or in this case the state, and not sold on the free market. The media debate is also a reminder of how much gold and treasure stories fascinate the public, and how deeply rooted these thoughts are. If the ring would have been made of bronze or silver it is likely that it would not have caught this much attention in the media from the outset.

*Fig. 3.—The medieval gold ring reported to Espoo City Museum in 2013 (image by Laura Kannasmaa / Espoo City Museum).*

Elsewhere in Finland, there are also recent reports of archaeological looting and site disturbance, apparently caused by metal detectorists. Archaeologists discovered holes caused by shovelling at Hakoinen Castle in Janakkala in May 2014 (Mansikka, 2014). Similarly, sites such as Rapola Castle have been victims of 'night hawking' (illegal metal detecting) (Yle, 2014).

Some researchers have also noticed that sites connected to the Second World War, for example in Finnish Lapland, have also attracted the attention of metal detectorists. This ranges from an expressed desire to interact with the history of the area, as reported to one of the authors (Thomas) by detectorists based in the south of the country, through to the vulnerability of certain sites to exploitation to feed the collectors market for war memorabilia (Seitonen and Herva, 2011:178). A recent Academy of Finland project grant award means that the extent of treasure hunting activity related to Second World War sites in northern Finland will be explored further.

## USE OF METAL DETECTING IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Metal detectors have been utilized occasionally in professional Finnish archaeology at least from the early 1950s (Erä-Esko, 1954:5). This is significant, since early use of metal detectors in archaeological research seems scarce in the literature, with one example from the USA dating to 1958 (Connor and Scott, 1998:76), and use of 'heavy and cumbersome metal detecting devices' used by archaeologists Tom Lethbridge and Gordon Fowler in England in 1946 (Hobbs, 2003:18). Since this perhaps surprisingly early example in Finland, metal detectors have been used occasionally, sometimes with good results but nevertheless not becoming a part of the archaeologist's typical toolkit. From the 1990s, their use in archaeology became more frequent, but it is not universally used in fieldwork. This means that many important metal period sites have been excavated without the help of metal detectors in the last two decades. On the survey side, the study areas are often very large compared to the available time for fieldwork. Therefore searching for otherwise visible sites is often prioritized instead of spending a day or two metal detecting a single field. There are several reasons behind this apparent underuse:

- the price, availability and user-friendliness of the devices;
- the limited resources in archaeology, and
- the negative reputation of metal detecting among some professional archaeologists due to its association with the treasure hunting hobby.

Nevertheless, times are changing. Metal detecting hobbyists have made several important finds and the archaeological community must acknowledge that many of the sites identified by them would be very difficult if not nearly impossible to spot with traditional means. Currently all three university archaeology departments across the country (at the Universities of Helsinki, Oulu and Turku) have metal detectors and pinpointers in their inventory. They use them in teaching to varying degrees (Ikäheimo pers. comm., 2014;

Ruohonen pers. comm., 2014). As one example, metal detecting played a significant role on the University of Helsinki's archaeological survey course of 2014, which was organized by one of the authors (Perttola) as a co-operative venture with "the Levänluhta site – Multidisciplinary research into a unique mystery in northern European prehistory" research project. During the course, students marked an area of 2560 m<sup>2</sup> next to the iron Age burial site of isokyrö levänluhta, divided the area into one-meter-wide strips, and systematically went through the strips using metal detectors. Out of the 113 metal objects unearthed in this way, most were modern and none clearly prehistoric, but even so, the students gained hands-on experience of using metal detectors and interpreting their signals. In addition to the universities, the NBA's field working units (Vanhatalo pers. comm., 2014; Koivisto pers. comm., 2014) as well as some museums (Takala pers. comm., 2014) and some private archaeological companies (Uotila pers. comm., 2014) have their own metal detectors and are using them actively in their fieldwork.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this brief paper, we have provided a glimpse of metal detecting in Finland, including its impact on archaeological research, and the range of interactions with heritage professionals and others. These can range from highly positive interactions to ones which are more problematic and troublesome. While some information is now better known, for example from the survey research of Siltainsuu and Wessman (2014), there are still 'unknowns' concerning the hobby in Finland, such as with regard to the scale of the hobby or the extent of illegal activities. As has been noted elsewhere (e.g. Thomas, 2014:232), the tendency of research on illegal activities such as looting to focus on countries where the scale of the problem is significantly greater, can also be problematic, in that heritage-related crimes in countries such as Finland can go relatively overlooked. At the same time, exploratory research into early archival material held by the NBA has indicated that metal detecting in relation to archaeology may have a long and rich history, stretching back at least as far as the early 1950s. There is clearly scope for further research into both the history of the metal detector and the profile of the metal detecting hobby within Finland, which we recommend is addressed further in the coming years. Furthermore, as with all metal detectorist-related research, greater contextualization within the international view is required. This includes gaining a better understanding of the extent to which metal detecting activity may be transnational in its nature, with hobbyists active in more than just their own country.

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